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ABSTRACT

At the end of a 14-week program designed to help them improve their writing and editing skills and to increase their interest in college, sixth graders at School #74 in Buffalo, New York published a book of their imagined narratives. They titled the book "Kids With a Dream." Acting on the premise that school children have a better understanding of the narrative as opposed to expository form, graduate students from the State University of New York at Buffalo asked middle schoolers to write about an imaginary day in their life at college. Students first toured the university campus and met college students, professors, and administrators. Then the middle schoolers formed writing partnerships and co-authored their narratives which were published in an anthology. (SAM)

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Creative Writing in the Urban Middle School:

Writing Imagined Narratives to Think About College

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Creative Writing in the Urban Middle School:

Writing Imagined Narratives to Think About College

Good afternoon, I am Steve Kutno and my topic today is using imagination to think about going to college.

Kids With a Dream is the title of the book that the School #74 children published at the end of the 14 week program. The title, suggested by one of the students, I believe came about as she and the other students were engaged in the final writing assignment, writing about an imaginary day in their lives as college students.

Let me just briefly remind you of two of our goals in working with School 74. Our primary goal was to help improve their writing and editing skills. A secondary goal was to increase their interest in college through a positive learning experience at the university. The first goal was achieved through different writing tasks like the ones discussed here, instruction in the form of mini-lessons, and most importantly the partnership approach to writing. The second goal was achieved by having the students come to the university, tour it, discuss it, and eventually, a part of the project that met both goals, write about it. We wanted the students to use the power of their imagination to help them understand college through their own narratives.

This task grew out of the previous year's project. We started with the assumption that elementary school children perform better and have a greater understanding of the narrative form. As part of the 1991-1992 academic year, we started the students with a narrative about a familiar subject, their own neighborhood. After writing a narrative, and then a detailed description of this familiar setting, the students worked closely with their tutors to write a story about the university or college neighborhood. The students were asked to write about an imaginary day in their life at college. This task worked so well,

both as a writing task and an introduction to university life, that we decided to include it in the following year's project.

Our attempt in this assignment was to get students to call upon what they knew about schools and combine it with new information learned at the university to write about an imagined day at college. As I sat to write this presentation several months after the program had ended, I looked out over the campus from my fifth floor office window and wondered about the strangeness an eleven-year old must have felt in this unfamiliar environment. Large brick buildings, in unusual modernistic shapes, connected to one another by blizzard proof tunnels with large placards announcing their names, surrounded not by houses but just large parking lots located in a vast open area in the suburbs—what an incredible if not inconceivable sight for a student from an old three-story, square, brick school building with all but one door locked in the middle of their own neighborhood.

One student asked about the name Baldy Hall. He wanted to know if the building was named for all the bald people that work there. On a more serious note, another student immediately pointed out the obvious but often overlooked. She asked, "Where are all the black people?" With this Dr. Collins explained that one of our goals in working with School #74 is to change this situation. He emphasized that attending college is a goal that can be realized by all students.

The journey to understanding college probably first began in the School #74 classrooms. I cannot tell you how the teachers prepared the students for their trip to the university. However, I have no doubt that as their yellow school bus pulled up, they were reminded to stay together, be quiet and polite and to follow all instructions. They were told to behave as though they were in their own school. As many of you know, colleges are not like the primary and secondary setting. What they encountered was hallways busy with the activity of students in conversation, studying, eating and in a few cases

dozing. Corridors were filled with tables, chairs and couches usually observed for classrooms.

After the children had arrived and settled down, each of the university instructors re-introduced themselves. They briefly explained their jobs at the university. I imagine that professor was just another word for teacher in the students' vocabulary. On each subsequent visit they would have the opportunity to meet with deans, vice presidents and even the president of the university. One student, I recall, asked the president if he was the principal of the university. This is a good example of the student trying to apply new material by drawing on previous experiences and knowledge. The student related what he knew about high posts in schools in association with what he had learned. We anticipated this and worked from the assumption that each student has a set of knowledge that needs to be confirmed, challenged, rejected or re-shaped. Our goal was to help introduce the university to their knowledge base.

Our final step in preparing the students to write was an introduction to different parts of college life including: choosing a major and career, admissions and financial aid, on and off campus living, and academic classes. Each tutor spoke on a specific topic and answered the questions of the sixth graders. We gave each student a university map and began our walking tour of UB in Baldy Hall, home to the Graduate School of Education and the School #74 project. We walked through different buildings, telling first its name and then its purpose. Each group had the opportunity to sit in a large lecture hall. One class entered and sat in a lecture hall alongside actual college students as the professor prepared to start his lecture from the podium at the front of the room. It didn't matter which features of the room or the class that the sixth graders noticed, such as the size, number of students, or the casualness of all the people in the classroom. It was OK that the first thing the students noticed was that the chairs swiveled and leaned back.

They saw the dorms, the student union and the on-campus shopping, all from a distance; walked through academic buildings with the opportunity to see smaller classrooms, the library, and students working and relaxing. The tour culminated with a quick look at the music building and an extended tour of the athletic facility. The students were impressed by its size and features. I don't kid you when I say that most of the stories contained at least one trip to the gym where the students imagined they would workout, swim or play some basketball with friends. We had to skip a good portion of the campus because of its size and our limited amount of time. We explained what goes on in other buildings and informed students about any programs in which they had a particular interest. Throughout the tour students were encouraged to take notes and ask questions about the university and the things they saw.

When it came time to write, students were told to write about an imaginary day in their life as a student at the university. They were encouraged to imagine their way to meaning. The tutors were available to help them fill in gaps and work along side the students in the meaning making process.

Let me share with you how this worked. After writing a couple of lines of a story describing a day in his life as a student at the University at Buffalo, eleven-year-old Aquell Douglas began to have trouble. He read his opening aloud to himself several times, as if doing so would help him discover what to say next:

"I wake up in the morning. Go to the bathroom to wash up." A pause, then again: "Bathroom to wash up." Another pause, followed by: "Fix my bed. Fix my bed. Um, uh. Fix my bed. Go to my first class. Go to my first class."

Fortunately, the partnership approach means Aquell did not face this writing task alone. Aquell had a helpful writing partner in Lisa Brooks. Noticing his difficulty, she asked, "What class is that?"

Aquell answered with uncertainty, "Um... Science, right?"

Lisa responded by asking, "What are you studying in college? What do you want to be?"

Aquell told her, this time quite certain, "President."

Lisa attempted to elicit what Aquell knew about school and being President and asked him, "How do you get to be President?"

Aquell answered, "You got to go to law school for two years, you got to be a governor or something like that."

Lisa tells him to put that down on his paper.

In this approach the tutor asked Aquell questions which would lead him to a better understanding of his own essay. The talk led to this revised opening of his essay:

"My ambition is to be President of the United States. I am going to get ready for that by going to law school and then entering politics. I want to be like State Assemblyman Arthur Eve.

Before law school, I'll be a student for four years at UB. I'll major in science and social studies. My favorite subject is science, and social studies will help me get ready for law school. I especially like to study about the earth and conservation of the environment. I also like newspaper work, like we are doing in Bob Lanier after school, so I'll want to study some journalism in college. Here is what my day will be like.

We notice that Aquell is infusing his experience in the sixth grade, science being his favorite subject, with things he has learned about college. By the time Aquell finished writing, his story filled four handwritten pages."

Aquell like his peers is helped through the writing process in a collaboration with a tutor. We saw our primary objectives as enhancing the writing abilities of the sixth graders and helping them to build confidence in their voices as writers. We pursued this objective by forming writing partnerships. Teaching writing by forming partnerships with students can best be described a form of co-authoring. The approach is built on the idea

that writing partners do more than teach, consult or confer with writers. Through collaboration writing partners show how successful writers work and what successful writing looks like.

Writing partnership means collaboration in the fullest sense of the word, in the sense of sharing the work of writing. In a writing partnership one writer helps another by questioning and advising, and sometimes even taking over some of the work to demonstrate or exemplify how a writer goes about solving a challenging writing problem. The idea was not to create dependency by using a partnership approach but to let students write to a point at which they get stuck and provide them with clues that will help them use their knowledge to move on. If necessary we can offer ideas that complete or complement the students work.

By using this model of following the students' leads, we let students lead in the effort of the work. A writing partner, for example, might help a writer turn a sentence into a paragraph by asking for specifics and writing them down, much as a woodworking teacher might help a student by running the first board through the table saw to show how a difficult cut is made.

The project focused on imagined narratives to help students anticipate working towards future achievements. We challenged the students to imagine their futures by exploring the possibilities in their writing. This is Vygotski's concept of teaching within "a zone of proximal development." This is the idea that instruction leads development by looking for opportunities to help students with challenges just beyond their current abilities, as when Lisa stepped in to help Aquell frame his thoughts about career objectives and college.

On occasion the integration of new information with old knowledge caused some confusion. For instance, Latina Wallace assumed that Cooke Hall was where one goes to eat, a logical assumption, and that the public safety building was a building for taking

classes in first aid, also a fair assumption. Both reasonable inferences needed only the help of the writing partner to correct.

Understanding through imagination has many practical approaches in the classroom. Listen to Marvin Locke imagine his way through a morning routine that is a combination of what he knows and what he has learned.

"The smell of coffee wakes me up every morning. I get up and take a nice hot shower. Then I get dressed and drink the coffee that awakened me and eat breakfast." He goes on to imagine how he might be late for class, in what might be a real experience, looking for a good or any parking spot.

One way in which you can apply this in your classrooms without the benefit of leaving the school is to create situations in which the students can use their imagination to generate texts. Let me tell you a brief example that is in your own context of understanding. Many if not all of you have had the opportunity to fly from city to city. Probably few of you have had the opportunity to sit in the cockpit; yet, if asked, each of you could write an imagined account of what it is like to be an airline pilot. You like your students are quite capable of calling upon previous knowledge to make inferences about something new. Our situation worked well because students know about being students. We introduced only a new setting and explained the functional differences of that setting. So students had shaped their imagined activities around a day not unlike their day in the sixth grade, going from social studies to science with recess in-between.

Finally, when Danyelle Rutherford writes, "We all worked together and afterward we all went out to have some fun. That was my whole day of college." She meant it.

References

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